

(From a memorial collection, 2005)

### **Visiting (Gustaf Sobin)**

James Clifford

The Vaucluse is a lot closer to Paris than it used to be. Last time, I made a day trip of it--a blurred TGV ride at either end. In the mid-seventies when my visits began, the train wended its way south, accompanying the Rhone, and one could watch the country change, leaving lush Burgundy for a stonier, light-drenched universe. Van Gogh wrote to Gauguin about his arrival in the Midi, leaning out the train window approaching Orange, to see if he was "in Japan yet." For me the moment of arrival would be announced by the loudspeaker at Avignon station: "Avignon-ga, Avignon-ga." And as often as not... Gustaf standing on the platform.

I was doing doctoral research in Paris, and my friend from graduate school, Michael Ignatieff, took several of us on a visit to his family house in the Vaucluse. He introduced me to an expatriate poet who was one of his neighbors, guessing we'd have something to say to each other. My interest in the Black Mountain tradition of poetry and in tribal cosmologies turned out to be a good enough starting point. We talked about Williams and Olson, about the work of Lucien Sebag and Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff on Amerindian mythologies, and Geneviève Calame-Griaule on "la parole chez les Dogon." Gustaf adopted me. I was a young *poète manqué*-- wondering if it was possible to bring

something like Walter Benjamin's miraculous "poetic prose" into scholarship. He read my academic work with an intensity that was flattering and intimidating—a vote of confidence for which I'll always be grateful.

I became one of the readers, the interlocutors, Gustaf so needed at that moment.

Having written for more than a decade in what he sometimes described as total isolation, he was finding his audience now, one by one. This was before his poetry began to appear in Eliot Weinberger's *Montemora*, and later with the *New Directions* imprimatur. In 1973 Gustaf had just finished the astonishing *Wind Chrysalid's Rattle*. He knew this was his best work... but he needed reassurance. The poetic voice he had been fashioning was a unique fusion of cosmopolitan English in the wake of Pound, French in the line of Mallarmé and Char, echoes of Heidegger, Hölderlin, or Celan, articulated, breathed, strained, through a very specific sensorium and place: the light, winds, and stones of Provence. How much of this embodied, rarified world would be comprehensible to distant American readers?

We corresponded (the stakes were always high!) and whenever I could visit we talked and walked. He showed me his country. Others who have experienced Gustaf's skills as a consummate poetic tour-guide will recall how those gentle performances worked. He would propose a trip by car to a site of interest, or a ramble through the nearby fields and rocky *garrigues*. It might be an excursion to the ruined Fort de Bioux (with its mysterious altar, linked perhaps to ancient sun-worship); or a drive to the Roman Pont

Flavien near Arles (an aesthetic gem in a bleak industrial zone); or a steep ascent to the spectacular village of Suzette, high on the flanks of Mont Ventoux. Closer to home, a narrowing canyon might be revealed as a place where paleolithic hunters trapped and slaughtered game. A walk after rainfall between rows of wired-up grape vines might yield flint chips and, if you were blessed, a broken knife blade or arrowhead. (Gustaf seemed to *see* these tiny edges in the dirt, without looking.)

In a café in L'Isle sur la Sorgue, stories of René Char: the resistance activities of "Capitaine Alexandre" in the hills above Nôtre Dame des Lumières, or the famous postwar *rencontres* with Heidegger. And the rigors of discipleship: Char would not accept his young follower's marriage to the painter Susanna Bott, and especially the birth of their daughter, Esther. The true poet could be wedded to his art alone! Then, after many years of silence, a reconciliation; and after Char's death, his companion Tina Jolas and Gustaf looked after the grave.

Later, when I brought my wife Judith and son Ben with me, Gustaf guided us along the Roman aqueduct of Nimes (*Luminous Debris*, pp. 203-222). We followed its fragmentary, often hidden, course through, over, and under a changing terrain--with a breathtaking arrival at the massive Pont du Garde, discovered from above, through the brush.

Another destination was equally calculated to seduce our twelve-year-old: "Bronze Mountain" (pp.187-193), a wind-swept first-century pilgrimage site where one could, equipped with tweezers and a film canister, collect a treasure trove of nearly-invisible

bronze rings and lozenges, votive offerings long ago slipped into the walls of a now-vanished sanctuary.

These excursions were acts of hospitality. And they were also performances of Gustaf's own poetics of place and time. It was never a question of simply walking in a lovely landscape. There was always a revelation--some poignant detail, resonant story, history, or allegory. *Luminous Debris* brings together some of the knowledge gained through all the years of attentive walking, the talk with locals and scholars, the hours spent in regional archives and libraries. *Ladder of Shadows* brings us through the Romanesque. And a third volume, unfinished, extends to the Second World War. (Gustaf was recently following traces of Walter Benjamin's last, fatal walk in the Pyrenees...)



My most recent visit was an intense, one-day dash down and back from Paris. From Avignon we drove to the familiar little house near Lacoste: a tall rectangle beside a rounded dry-stone *borie*. (René Char had named this profile: “Petrarch et Laura.”)



Skirting a field of grape-vines, we passed the *cabanon* where, looking across the valley toward the Mont Ventoux, Gustaf has written, virtually every day, for the past forty years.

Coffee on a small, shaded patio, joined by Susanna: the talk was of the Iraq war and of a country, the United States, apparently gone mad with power and fear. What were people saying, doing back home? For all his European sympathies and deep roots in the



Vaucluse, Gustaf still saw himself, with endlessly renewed ambivalence, revulsion and hope, as an American writer.



A short excursion was proposed for the afternoon, a drive across the valley to a vineyard near Roussillon, *Cave Bonnelly*. It wasn't far, on foot, around the edge of a field to an oak, somewhat taller than the rest. This is the very tree, some believe, that inspired the tortured form, center-stage, in *Waiting for Godot*.

It's well known that Samuel Beckett and his companion Suzanne fled Paris when their names turned up on a Gestapo list of *résistants*. In Roussillon, they waited out the war, employed as field-laborers and often walking several kilometers cross-country to the Bonnelly farm. Fuel had become scarce during the Occupation, and much of the landscape was denuded. According to local lore, a single tree survived on the Beckett's path, offering shade in the blistering sun. Opinions vary about which one it was, and if, in fact, the tree is still living. But the oak near *Cave Bonnelly* is a leading candidate, so Gustaf and I communed with it for a few minutes. A conscientious literary tourist, I took a picture.





Back at the vineyard's tasting room, the elder Bonnelly, surrounded by wine bottles and a picture of his farm's most famous worker, entertained us with stories of "Monsieur Beckett," whom he remembered very well. Yes, *bien sûr*, the Becketts continued their resistance work in Roussillon (a point of some controversy). And there were plans to convert their house, now empty, into a museum of some sort.



The Beckett house, in sight of Roussillon's famous ochre cliffs, was our next stop. Shuttered and overgrown, with stained stucco walls, the place exuded emptiness. It was hard to imagine it, as a tourist destination, telling some kind of heroic story.



There was time for a beer at *Café de la Poste* in Goult, the town through which Gustaf's mail is delivered (his "lifeline," he called it). Then a simple meal with Susanna on the patio, looking out over vines and hills in the falling light, and I was careening north on a train crammed with returning vacationers.



How to remember this last hasty visit? One more in a series: conversations over the years punctuated by misunderstandings, silences and renewals, all amounting somehow to a precious friendship. Another performance by the expatriate of his world: an intimate landscape of experience searching for interlocutors. Or my own nostalgic,

luminous image of the poet's life, without its winters, the bitter days, a *mistral* rattling at the windows.

And what to make of our half-comic search for a literary tree?

Hugh Kenner and Marjorie Perloff have proposed, paradoxically, that *Waiting for Godot* is a work of "realism." The play's wasted world, its menacing strangers and grim humor, its time of immobility, of frustrated hope, of waiting, waiting for a release forever deferred--all this rendered quite precisely the experience of wartime occupation. Of course, the play was stripped of historical references, thus intensifying, allegorizing, the blocked reality that was daily life for the Becketts in Roussillon. Only a few specifics survived. In the play's original French version, Vladimir reminds Estragon: "And yet we were together in the Vaucluse. Yes, we were picking grapes for a man named Bonnelly, Roussillon." (In Beckett's later English text, the two tramps can't manage to remember the name, or where it was that they once picked grapes.)

Of course, the tree at the center of *Waiting for Godot* survives, luxuriantly proliferating meanings. (How many have attached themselves to its twisted shape over the years?)

And it also grows in a particular place, on a path near a field of grapes.

Gustaf's writing lives in a similar space of dissemination *and* rootedness, of structural purity *and* sensuous perception, of myth *and* materiality. His metaphors ("Wind, whose

iris we are. Whose stutter.”) have all been seen, felt, heard. The land, light, sound and history of Provence are stripped, breathed, held an instant in language, and released.

That moment together in the real shade of a fictional tree.